

## BUDDHISM AND PROBLEMS OF THE MODERN AGE

By Dr. G.P. Malalasekera

**B**uddhism puts salvation or Nibbana completely within the reach of man. It does not, however, come to him as a gift from outside himself; it has to be won. There is no one who seeks him out and cures his alienation from ultimate values. In other words, Buddhism has no place for a Saviour who takes upon himself the sins of others and obtains for them redemption therefrom.

### Devas

Buddhism admits the existence of many categories of gods, who are called *devas* or radiant ones. None of these *devas*, however, is permanent and eternal. They are to be found in various planes of existence; some of them have longer life-spans than others. Though none of them is almighty, some of them are credited with superhuman

powers and their favours could be won, though not by prayers or sacrifices. According to Buddhism, devotees can share merits and radiate thoughts of loving-kindness to them to invoke their protection.

Their existence in the *deva* world and the lengths of their lives there depend on the good deeds they had done in previous lives and when their 'store of merit' is exhausted, they disappear from their celestial abodes and are born elsewhere. Many, if not most of them, are followers of the Buddha whose goodness they know. They are not as fortunate as human beings because in the human world there are more opportunities for good deeds than in the realm of the *devas*. Humans can 'share' the merit which they attain by their good acts to the devas.

### Sharing of Merit

The doctrine on 'sharing of merit' is part of the Buddha's teaching. Such sharing is made by the doer of the good deed resolving that 'so and so' may partake of the 'merit' of his good deed. The sharing becomes really effective when the intended recipient becomes aware of the good deed and rejoices therein. This is called *anumodana* (rejoicing therein). The *anumodana* can be done even without the knowledge of the doer of the deed. The rationalisation behind it is that when one finds joy in another's good deed, with or without the knowledge of the latter, one's own mind is cleaned and purified and this produces its own meritorious effects. The *anumodana*

can be done by anyone as a conscious, deliberate act. The 'sharing of merit' is itself a good deed and, therefore, adds to the 'merit' of the good deed already done. The 'person who shares' loses nothing thereby but adds to his store of merit.

There are special *devas* or deities of great power, who are considered protectors of Buddhism. Each Buddhist country has its own pantheon whose sphere of influence is largely local, though there are a few who could be invoked anywhere. Many of the local deities have been borrowed or adopted from the followers of other faiths, chiefly from Hinduism in the case of Theravada lands. In Myanmar, for instance, the Buddhists seek the favour of the Nats, who preside over the destinies of Myanmars. In Japan, on the other hand, various Bodhisattvas (Buddha Aspirants) are invoked.

There are various shrines dedicated to these deities, where devotees make offerings of fruits and flowers as a token of homage, their praises sung or chanted and requests made for their favours. No animal is ever sacrificed. This form of worship has been greatly influenced by the practices of the theistic religion. This corresponds to what the Buddha said when He declared that in times of distress or anxiety, people are prepared to go anywhere to seek protection. But the favours asked for are concerned with mundane affairs. No Buddhist believes that the worship of *devas*, however powerful they are, would lead to spiritual development.

## Faith

The question is often asked as to what place Faith (Pali, *Saddha*) occupies in Buddhism. It may be useful in this connection to recall that in the original Pali canonical texts, there is no word equivalent to the term 'Buddhist'. People are divided into various categories according to the degree of their spiritual development. We thus have that ordinary man, one of the 'many folk' (*puthujjana*), the good man (*kalyana-puthujjana*), the noble man (*ariya*), and the perfect man (*arahant*). The texts do speak of people who go to the Buddha, his Teaching (the Dhamma), and his Noble Disciples (the Sangha) for 'refuge' (*sarana*). In Buddhism, there is no formal act of 'baptism' though there is a stereotyped formula used by Buddhists in Buddhist lands to express his act of 'taking refuge' which merely means that the devotee accepts the Buddha as his Teacher and Guide, the Doctrine as his philosophy and his Way of Life and the Sangha (the Community of Monks) as the exemplars of this Way of Life.

The Buddhist quality of *Saddha* means this acceptance in the belief and knowledge that these Refuges are worthy of such acceptance. There is no 'blind faith' involved, no case at all of 'believe or be damned'. The Buddha agreed that there were many teachers and many Ways of Life preached by them and many followers of such teachers and their Ways of Life. Everyone is left completely free to make his choice; there is no restriction at all on the individual's autonomy in this respect. In fact,

there were instances when followers of other teachers repudiated them and wished to transfer their allegiance to the Buddha, He discouraged them and asked them to give the matter further thought. When they further persisted, He advised them to continue their benefactions to their earlier teachers.

The well-known passage in the *Kalama Sutta*, which is so often quoted in this context, is undisputed evidence of this freedom of choice. It states quite categorically that nothing should be accepted merely on the grounds of tradition or the authority of the teacher, or because it is the view of a large number of people, distinguished or otherwise. Everything should be weighed, examined and judged according to whether it is true or false in the light of one's convictions. If considered wrong, they should not be rejected outright but left for further consideration. Not only is doubt not considered a heinous sin; it is positively encouraged.

### **Right Views & Wrong Views**

Buddhist has no specific definition for the terms *sammaditthi* (right views) and *micchaditthi* (wrong views). They refer to views which are intrinsically right or wrong whether held by Buddhists or others. No view is to be considered sacrosanct and beyond question. Freedom of thought is a matter of human dignity. Even the validity of the Buddha's own statements could be questioned. The Buddha claims no authority for his doctrine except his own personal experience. Real authority is the



authority which truth itself possesses, the truth which authenticates itself. Such truth has great power, the power even of performing miracles (*saccakiriya*), as shown in so many Jataka stories, which are part of the Buddhist cultural heritage. *Saddha* should, therefore, be better translated as confidence, trust or conviction, rather than faith, because faith has connotations not found in the concept of *Saddha*.

### **Happiness of All Beings**

The Way of Life taught by the Buddha is not, as sometimes suggested, meant specifically for those who live the monastic life. It is true that the spirituality of non-attachment which should be developed to attain Nibbana could be achieved more quickly by the monk rather than by the layman. But, it is quite wrong to say that full liberation can be achieved only by the monk and not by the layman living a family life. The Buddha's discourses, as collected and edited by the Council of Elders which met after the Buddha's passing away, consist largely of sermons addressed to monks because it was they who mainly formed his immediate audiences. But, there are numerous discourses addressed to laymen as well. Sometimes they are addressed to a single individual.

In his very first sermon, called Establishment of the Rule of Righteousness, he developed the concept of the welfare and happiness of all beings, without any discrimination whatsoever, 'out of compassion for the but

world'. It was the first time in human history, as we know, that the idea of a general good or a common good is envisaged, affecting not only the common man but also the peoples of the world and even more the inhabitants of the universe. It was also described as a teaching which gives results in this life, without delay, meant for all time, verifiable and inviting investigation.

### **Unity of Mankind**

The Buddha taught not only the necessity of an inner revolution of the individual for human happiness but also the need for an outer revolution in the life of Society. Thus, for instance, he preached the fundamental oneness and unity of mankind, irrespective of colour or race or other physiological characteristics — as in the case of animals — and created a revolution for the abolition of the caste system which was prevalent in India in his day. In order to demonstrate his concept of the oneness of mankind, he moved not only with kings and capitalists and aristocratic ladies, but also with the poorest of the poor, with beggars and scavengers, robbers and courtesans.

He admitted into the Order (the Sangha) which he founded, men and women from all grades of society, regardless of their birth or origin. He ministered to the sick and the destitute, consoled the stricken and brought happiness to the miserable. It is said that the first hospitals in history were organised under his direction. He did not retire from the world after his Enlightenment

lived for forty-five years in the community, constantly seeking out those whom he could help.

### **Democracy**

He valued greatly the liberty of the individual, freedom of thought and expression and the ideals of democracy. A commitment to Buddhism is not contradictory to openness. The Order of the Sangha is considered the oldest democratic institution in the world and it was set up as a model for lay organisations, including political institutions. The ideal state envisaged in Buddhism is a democracy, working for the material and spiritual welfare of the people, guaranteeing political, religious and personal freedom as well as economic security with full employment.

### **Economic Welfare**

Planning for economic welfare is clearly emphasized as part of the functions of the king or the state. 'When that is properly done,' says the Buddha, 'the inhabitants, following each his own mission, will no longer harass the realm, the state revenue will increase, the country will be quiet and at peace and the populace, pleased with one another and happy, dancing with their children in their arms, will dwell with open doors.' A Buddhist text, the *Mahavastu*, says, 'The world rests on two foundations: the acquisition of wealth and the conservation of what is gained. Therefore, to acquire wealth and conserve what you have gained, make firm efforts, within the bounds of



righteousness.'

### **Ownership of Property**

Public ownership of property is favoured in many parts of the world, especially where socialist principles hold sway. As far as it is known, the first consistent and thorough going application of the principle of common ownership in a specific community or society is to be found in the *Vinaya* rules which govern the Order of the Buddhist Sangha, where all property, movable and immovable, of any significant economic value, is held in common trust, without any sort of compulsion. Life in the Sangha is a corporate life based on the principles of voluntary co-operation.

### **Buddhism & Mankind**

From what has been already said, it will be seen that Buddhism is very much concerned with this world and the life of mankind therein. It is by no means a world-denying religion. The Buddha described his teaching as being *Sanditthika*, primarily concerned with this world, with this life. Even the highest happiness, that of *Nibbana*, is to be striven for in this very life. It lays the greatest stress on the absolute need for making the best of the ever-fleeting present, so as to ensure that the future is controlled for our well-being. The past is gone beyond recall. Only the present is available to us for the good life. The future is yet to come and what we make of it depends entirely on us.

The Buddhist does not regard the world as a prison from which man must escape to enter heaven. Rather, he seeks to build heaven here. He is not a materialist, nor does he scorn the advantages of a material civilization. His problem is not that of a choice between the senses and the spirit but the domination of the spirit. The Buddhist ideal is to establish an equilibrium between the outside and the inside, between the externalities of nature and the world around us and the spiritual progress through the conquest of selfishness. To him, Life is a great adventure, often a dangerous adventure. The main problem is how this greatest of all adventures could be directed to a happy ending.

### **Perfection**

The Buddhist ideal is that of arahantship, i.e. perfection. To achieve this ideal, all those factors that militate against such well-being must be removed, not only for oneself but also for all things that have life. The Buddhist cannot seek his personal welfare, regardless of others; his welfare is inextricably bound up with the welfare of the whole world. Hence the Buddha's injunction that the good man must be *sabba-panabhutahitanukampi*, deeply concerned with and actively working for the happiness and welfare not only of human beings but of all living creatures.

Wherever Buddhism found its way, it encouraged the growth of a civilization and a culture marked by tolerance, humanity, sympathy and understanding, the

twin virtues of *karuna* (compassion) and *panna* (wisdom) which form the two main planks of the Buddhist doctrine.

### **The Modern World**

The distinctive feature of the modern world is the acceleration and magnitude of the process of change. We witness today almost unbelievable change in the drastic and revolutionary transformation of all human institutions in every field of human activity. It is true that the breathtaking advantages of science and technology have destroyed the solid moorings of a more stable way of life, which had its own ethical character, and cast large masses of men adrift in a strange and difficult world. The world is fast changing out of recognition.

But these advances have also brought emancipation to humanity in many directions. They have given us great social and intellectual gains and the means whereby to destroy hunger and poverty. Societies have been knitted together closer than ever before, and made more responsive to men's needs and demands. The fault will not be in the products of scientific and technical advancement but in our failure to make wise and proper use of them.

In any case, we cannot stop the world; it will go on changing, for change, says the Buddha, is the fundamental fact of life. No revolution can put an end to change itself. That is the beauty of change. Without constant change, yesterday's revolution becomes today's convention and today's convention is tomorrow's tyranny.

Our very survival is tied up with change. This is where modern man must find Buddhism to be particularly relevant to his age. Buddhism accepts change; in fact, it is built on the truth of constant change and flux. We must learn to take the rivers as they flow.

We must cultivate the quality of resilience, the ability to adopt, adapt and be flexible. The moment we come to rigid conclusions and refuse to consider different points of view, we cease to be intelligent. Our views tend to harden into dogmas and dogmas make us mulish in our obstinacy. New challenges call for new responses. If each individual takes care to avoid dogmas, the entire community becomes an open society which makes the good life possible.

### **Problems Facing Mankind**

The problems facing mankind are many. We have problems of food, industry, labour, wages, unemployment, inequality of opportunity, the gap between the haves and the have-nots, to mention but a few. They appear very complicated, as indeed they are, but the aspiration of the common man is a simple one. He merely wishes to be able to live in peace and happiness, with freedom to build his own little world, in human dignity.

He also needs fellowship and understanding and love, and something that will provide hope for himself and his children, both for this life and in the next. In many parts of the world even these basic needs are not available. Neither security nor justice is to be found

universally. Uncertainty and insecurity have become a deadly almost universal curse, both among the rich and the poor, producing sometimes apathy and indifference, sometimes unrest, tension and revolution. Science has failed to find the secret of happiness. The 'Conquest of nature' has not succeeded in achieving either plenty or peace. This is not surprising to us, because the Buddha taught us that happiness is to be found in living in harmony with the Dhamma, i.e. with Nature, with its beauty and grandeur. The truth is that mankind, as a whole, is unhappy, desperately miserable.

The situation, therefore, would appear to be extremely complicated and probably incapable of solution. Yet, if we were to examine the matter carefully, with knowledge and understanding, we should realize that our modern problems are not fundamentally different from the perennial problems that have afflicted people at all times and in all climes. If our modern problems differ from those of our forbears, it is largely in the matter of their greater number and wider variety.

Now, the fundamental teaching of the Buddha, as we have seen already, is that nothing happens except as a result of causes. Once the causes are investigated and understood, the solutions could be found. It is all too frequently assumed that the teachings of ancient sages, such as the Buddha, are too simple to be efficacious enough to help us in the solution of the exceedingly complex problems which affect the individual and society in contemporary life. The message of the Buddha



is addressed to the basic human predicament and this makes it both timeless and timely. It is a guide to action in terms of thought, word and deed. Each succeeding generation can and must rediscover the relevance of that message to the solution of its own problems.

### **Highest Happiness**

It is the Buddha's teaching that the highest happiness is peace and that there can be no real happiness without peace. The world is distraught with fears and threats of wars. Countries involved in war have become awesome arsenals of military hardware, ensuring continued business and profit to merchants of death and destruction: Following conflicting ideologies, not only military personnel but thousands of innocent men, women and children are being mercilessly massacred and incalculable damage is inflicted on land and property. Nothing escapes the fury and the frenzy of battle, and to what end? 'Hatred never ceases by hatred,' declared the Buddha, 'but only by love', and again, 'Victory breeds ill-will, for the conquered are unhappy.' In many other parts of the world, war-clouds hang menacingly near. The air is full of violence in thought, word and deed.

This, then, is the task of religion – all religions. It is religion alone that can affect the necessary change of heart – religion which consists not in the performance of rites and ceremonies and the preaching of sermons, but in a life of holiness and inner tranquility, resulting in the disarmament of the mind, which is the only real

disarmament.

### **Root-causes of War**

The Buddha also teaches us that the only way to achieve peace is by eliminating the root-causes of war – greed, hatred and ignorance. Today the world is divided into people of various ideologies, with their power-blocs, who devote most of their minds and energies to the sterile, negative, cruel business of wars. The world cannot have peace till men and nations renounce selfish desires, give up racial arrogance and cleanse themselves of the egoistical lust for possession and power. Ideology divides, it brings about conflict. Ideology takes multifarious forms – political, religious, economic, social and educational. Ideology is an escape from reality. It brutalises man and holds him in bondage to fanaticism and violence.

It is in men's minds that conflicting ideologies are born, resulting in tension and war and it is from the minds of men that these conflicts should be eradicated so that humanity could be filled with thoughts of harmony and peace. The Buddha declared that the mind is foremost, the forerunner of all things, good or bad, that, when the mind is cleansed of evil, peace and happiness will reign.

Religion, if it is true religion, must take the whole of man as its province and not merely certain aspects of his life. The good man, i.e., the man who follows his religion, knows that there can be no happiness or peace on earth as long as there is poverty and starvation, injustice and oppression, discriminative legislation, racial

segregation, social disabilities and inequalities, corroding fear, mutual distrust and suspicion. Self-respect is as necessary to happiness as food, and there can be no self-respect among those who do not have the opportunity to achieve the full stature of their manhood.

### **World Problems**

The problems that face mankind today and threaten the very structure of humanity are world-problems and not isolated in this or that geographical area. Their solution, therefore, has to be sought in world-terms. This involves new conceptions, on our part, of human relations, not only in the family and the home, our city, village and our country, but in the context of the world. There is the need to educate men and women with regard to the evils of narrow nationalism, racism, colour and creed. Intolerance, arrogance and bigotry which seek to deprecate and denigrate other peoples, other cultures, other religions, other ways of life different from our own – these must be eradicated, if we are to find peace.

### **Sinister Past**

It has been admitted that religion has, in many respects, a sinister past to redeem. Too frequently, its mission to mankind has been submitted to exigencies of provincial or national politics and nefarious schemes for aggrandizement and conquest. In earlier ages, most national wars were also religious wars. Too often, also, religion has buried itself with details of ritual and

dogmas, questions of ministerial organisation and the infallibility of books and persons. It thus narrowed itself down to priestcraft and sacerdotalism, looking after its endowments and establishments.

### **Secularisation**

Modern man has, therefore, the right to ask, what use religion has for us of this age. They would argue that religion has served its purpose; let it, therefore, die. This is the main cause of secularization which religion everywhere has to face. Since the problems arising from secularization are more or less common to all the World Religions, there is no need to examine them specifically here.

The gravest of them, however, are the problems connected with the youth of the world about whom there exist many misgivings among the older generation and chiefly among the leaders of the various religions. These misgivings centre mainly round the violence prevalent among many youth movements and the use of narcotics and drugs by large numbers of young men and women. Both these factors seem to be symptoms of a deeply-rooted disease, which, like all other diseases, must be the result of certain causes. It is the causes that we must discover before we can think of remedies.

### **Strata of Culture**

In almost every country in the modern world, there seem to be three, fairly distinguishable strata of culture.

First there is the traditional culture of simple virtues, conservative in outlook, which might be called the culture of normalcy striving to maintain ancient values which have been tested in the crucible of experience. The second is the modern technologically organised society, liberal in outlook, trying to adapt itself to changes taking place around it, with almost breathtaking rapidity. The third is what has been called counter – culture, represented in the popular mind by so-called hippies, with their long hair, unkempt appearance, questioning the beliefs and values, with their penchant for rock-music, uninhibited sex, indulgence in narcotics and drugs with noisy demonstrations, turning to a communal or tribal life-style, going back to Nature in what they call ‘sheer aestheticism’.

This counter-culture group is generally looked upon with fear and disgust by the other two cultures. However, there are those, who, having made a close study of counter-culture, maintain that the popular image is wrong, shallow and superficial, and that their unorthodox behaviour is only a means of protest against established society which they regard as completely motivated by prejudice and self-interest.

In the light of what has thus been stated, what should be the attitude of religion to those of the modern age, who are to be found everywhere, in numbers large or small? Surely, it should be an attitude of tolerance and sympathy and, above all, of understanding, flexibility and adaptation.



Let us not forget that some of the leaders of religion have themselves been revolutionaries. The Buddha, for instance, was one of the greatest rebels in human history. He denied the assumptions on which religion in his day was based and gave the religious quest an entirely new orientation. He refused to accept the sincerity of the Vedas or the power of the priesthood. He refuted the illusion that human problems could be solved with sacred rituals and incantations. He was a sworn enemy of the caste-system on which the whole structure of Indian Society rested. He was ridiculed and persecuted and several attempts were made on his life.

### **Salient Characteristics**

During the 2500 years of its history, Buddhism has successfully faced the challenges that confronted it. Resilience and tolerance have been among its salient characteristics. It has no hierarchical institutions and no rigid dogmas. Its benign influence on humanity is proven by the cultures and civilizations which have grown in countries into which it has spread. It has a message for modern man as potent as in the days of the Buddha. Buddhism does not promise that the ills from which humanity suffers can be alleviated in any fundamental way by some grand, overall organization of society. While denying any innate sinfulness in man, it declares that salvation is an individual affair and can be achieved only by virtuous conduct and mental culture. Its whole teaching has been summarised by the Buddha himself as:

“The avoidance of all evil; the accumulation of the good; the purification of one’s mind – this is the message of the Buddhas.”

### **Colonialism**

During the last four or five centuries, Buddhism has suffered from colonialism in many Asian countries, by external and internal wars and the deliberate efforts of the followers of other religions to weaken and destroy it. The Sangha which has kept the teaching alive and which enjoyed the patronage of those in power has been disorganised and weakened as a result of forces beyond its control.

But, the outlook is once more bright. Buddhist unity has been forged by such organizations as the World Fellowship of Buddhists and the World Sangha Council which have brought together Mahayana and Theravada in order to follow a joint programme of action. There is a great deal of illiteracy and poverty among Buddhist peoples to be overcome. The Sangha must be educated to meet modern needs. Buddhism has never been a passive, docile religion. It has been one of the greatest civilizing forces of the world. ■